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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the U.S. college admissions market in the late 1980s and 1990s and how enrollments have shifted, competition has increased, and nonschool-based services have mushroomed. Introduced is the concept of admissions management: a constellation of behaviors which include, among others, the buying of services to help mostly high-socioeconomic status, college-bound students maximize their college prospects, package themselves, and emotionally stabilize themselves as they try to deal with the difficult processes involved in college admissions. Also reviewed are enrollment trends, individual choice processes, and admissions environment in the context of the interaction between individual behavior and the practices of college admissions professionals. The paper takes as problematic the practices of many of today's college-going students who appear to be following newly legitimated cultural rules and patterns of activity regarding college choice. Also offered are insights into the social construction of a new type of person--a college applicant who is in need of the professional services of a private, independent educational consultant. Contains a 35-item bibliography. (GLR)

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Buying and Selling Higher Education: The Social Construction of the College Applicant.

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In this paper I examine the U.S. college admissions market in the late 1980s and 1990s and how enrollments have shifted, competition has increased, and nonschool-based services have mushroomed. As an individual-level counterpart to colleges' enrollment management, I introduce the concept of admissions management: a constellation of behaviors which include, among others, buying services to help mostly high-SES, college-bound students maximize their college prospects, package themselves, and anchor themselves emotionally as they navigate the troubled waters of college admissions. I offer insights into the social construction of a new type of person--a college applicant--who is in need of professional services: the guidance and assistance of a private, independent educational consultant.

The data comes from periodical literature and excerpts of interviews from parents, students, and teachers on how they view the college admissions process, what their suggestions are for areas needing reform, and insights into the difficulties inherent in the college-choice process. This analysis grows out of a larger project which studied who goes where to college by examining the ways in which social class and high school guidance operations combine to shape a high school student's perception of her opportunities for a college education. This larger project consisted of in-depth interviews with 12 white female, middle-range academic performers[1] in high school and interviews with those students' best friends (12), parents (12), and counselors

[1] GPA range 2.8-3.4; SAT range 700-1250.

(4). The students were drawn from four California high schools, selected for having a majority of students from a high or low social class background, and high and low levels of college advising. They include two public schools, a private preparatory school, and a Catholic school.

Table One
School Characteristics

SES	High Guidance Operation	Low Guidance Operation
High	**Paloma School** College Preparatory Private	**University High School** Comprehensive Public
Low	**Gate of Heaven High School** Comprehensive Private-Catholic	**Mission Cerrito High School** Comprehensive Public

1.1 Students and College Choice As We Approach 2000

> Well, see the thing is, no matter what you do people are going to try to sell themselves and you can't prevent it.
>
> Rebecca

How students connect with colleges is a puzzle reflecting two distinct but interactive processes: student applications and institutional admissions. Potential students find out about and enroll in colleges at the encouragement of family, friends, high school advisors, teachers, private counselors, freeway signs, radio-tv-newspaper-direct mail advertising, and many other sources. Colleges, in their admissions processes, go through many stages: marketing assessments, recruitment, establishing admissibility criteria, selection, notification, and enrollment.

The late 20th century is a time of rapid change in the college admissions world. Enrollments would seem to indicate a buyer's market, but in fact, students face an admissions market where competition has intensified despite declining enrollments. Although it is easier to get into college now than it was 20 years ago, it is harder to get into what some people consider the "right" college (Winerip, 1984) because of increased competition, rising admissions standards, and further stratification of higher education opportunities.

For upper-middle-class students, college is a pivotal career investment and choosing the right college is a pressure-cooker experience. An industry has grown up to help college-bound students and their families with their college choices. Examples of this growing phenomena are: self-help and coaching guidebooks and software; statewide clearinghouses on college placement; consortia which arrange for high school counselors to visit little-known college campuses in order to become familiar with and recommend those campuses; and slick magazines which extol the virtues of a private college education and are marketed to populations of students stratified by SAT test scores and socioeconomic status.

College admissions has become a complex, high-stakes game where insider information is difficult to come by and where the caseload of a high school guidance counselor would boggle the mind of a welfare worker. Some parents often consider their children's college prospects when choosing preschools and

elementary schools (Kanner, 1987), and admissions practitioners bemoan the extraordinary amounts of time and money that students spend in "packaging themselves ... often investing less energy on making a good match between abilities and aspirations." (Fitzsimmons, 1991)

In the main[2], the processes of individual selection of higher education institutions and institutional recruitment of individuals have been studied as separate phenomena by different researchers using vastly different disciplinary paradigms. Two approaches have dominated: micro-level, status attainment analyses of access (Alexander and Eckland, 1975; Hearn, 1991); or macro-level, econometric analyses of institutional marketing or financial aid policies' impact on individual behavior (Jackson, 1982; Olson and Rosenfeld, 1984).

Status attainment research primarily has focused on the educational progress of students grouped by ability, social class, and ethnicity by taking an individual level approach, or at best, an analysis of an aggregation of individuals (Knottnerus, 1987). Marketing and policy analyses ignore the actions of autonomous individuals and focus instead on the ability of institutions to bring about macro-level change. These separate approaches lack an integrated analysis that adequately accounts for the reciprocal influence of either type of actor--

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[2] The notable exception is Manski and Wise (1983), which is based on the National Longitudinal Study of the High School Class of 1972.

the individual student or the policy/collegiate organization--on the other's actions or motivations.

In this paper I examine enrollment trends, individual choice processes, and admissions environment influences to look at the interaction between individual behavior and the practices of college admissions professionals. I focus on this individual and institutional nexus because I am trying to look beyond the static nature of structural models and avoid an oversimplification which assumes the aggregate is the sum of individual actions (Hannaway, 1987).

The norm for the last decade for college admissions has been heightened competition among individuals to get into college and among institutions either to recruit the cream of the high school crop (Fitzsimmons, 1991) or to manage their enrollments to maintain fiscal health (Bean, 1990). This competition impacts not only college admissions practices but also individual applicant behavior.

In this paper, I take as problematic the practices of many of today's college-going students who appear to be following newly legitimated cultural rules and patterns of activity regarding college choice. These practices already appear normative, universal, taken-for-granted and virtually the only reasonable way to approach college choice decisionmaking (Thomas et al., 1987). To illustrate this phenomenon, I draw on interviews with students and parents who have used the services of private counselors, and an analysis of contemporary admissions

environments based on extensive periodical reports on the use of these independent counselors and on the major changes in the whole arena of college choice.

1.2 The Changing World of College Admissions

Increasingly, colleges and universities are competing among themselves for resources and students, political power and legitimacy, prestige and economic well-being. For many colleges and universities, admissions is more than just the composition of a student body, **it is survival**, and admissions policies reflect economic, political, and academic considerations (Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, 1977). This heightened competition, survival mentality, and increased stratification of U.S. colleges and universities reflects a changing world of admissions.

This changing world has meant shifts in what colleges call themselves, how selective they are, and who applies. In the past quarter century, the number of single-sex colleges has declined precipitously, with men's colleges virtually disappearing. Many liberal arts and state colleges have expanded their curriculum and upgraded their names to universities (Robertson, 1989), while major public and private universities are getting an increasingly competitive applicant pool. Leading public institutions are now sometimes referred to as "public Ivys" in what has been called the yuppieization of public universities. (Moll, 1985)

In general, even though only half of all postsecondary institutions are selective to one degree or another (Carnegie

Commission on Higher Education, 1977), there has been a trend to moderate selectivity across all of U.S. higher education (Robertson, 1989). This has led to higher admissions standards and elaborate admissions indices in large state systems.

Given the decline in the number of high school graduates, there should have been a buyer's market in college admissions in the 1980s and 1990s. Yet, it has become harder to get into the more selective colleges and universities. The Harvard Dean of Admissions reported that not only are today's median SAT test scores more than a hundred points higher than they were in Harvard classes of the 1950s, but that in the same time period, Harvard has gone from admitting over 60% of all applicants to admitting only 15-20% (Fitzsimmons, 1991).

The college application surge began in the early 1980s and is most apparent at the top 50-100 colleges. The most selective 32 U.S. colleges, members of the Consortium for Financing Higher Education (COFHE), experienced a 29% increase in applications from 1983-89 with resulting declines in acceptance rates (Schurenberg, 1989). Colleges today, like most other modern organizations (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983), have enormous influence over each other's practices through tight professional linkages, increased interaction, and established patterns of coalition and competition. Elite institutions, which enroll only 2% of the U.S. student population (Cookson and Persell, 1985), nonetheless have a major influence in defining the norms and standards which shape and channel admissions behavior.

This skyrocketing competition for college places is caused, at least to some degree, by the discovery of marketing by moderately selective institutions in response to enrollment declines predicted for the mid-1970s, and only now materializing in the 1990s. Fearing life-threatening enrollment declines, colleges increased marketing budgets 64% from 1980 to 1986, and on average spent $1700 to bring in each new student. All of the best marketing techniques have been brought to bear on college admissions: marketing and public relations consultants, focus groups for prospective students, institutional repositioning, and enrollment management (Schurenberg, 1989). Along with this unrestrained media blitz, colleges have also attempted in the 1980s to renew their efforts at educational equity by increasing access for ethnically diverse students groups.

Not surprisingly, the college marketing frenzy gave rise to another. Feeling a need to maintain a competitive edge, students from traditional markets for these colleges began to seek admissions assistance (Newsweek, 1989). Individual application practices, private counselors, guidebooks and other aspects of the changing face of admissions competition can be seen as mimetic behavior in the face of uncertainty--in times of turmoil and unpredictability we rely on what has proven to be successful. (Thomas, et al., 1987; DiMaggio and Powell, 1983)

All of this competition is fueled by basic economic and security drives: parents want to invest their sizable, college tuition dollars wisely, while seniors want a safe space to be

able to talk through their fears and anxieties about making their first important decision in an environment of intense competition and pressure. Many middle-class parents and students alike are cued in to attending the "right college," and believe that the best investment in college will come from an acceptance at a well-known, elite institution. Parents are aware that going to a selective college increases one's social standing, contacts, and income potential.[3] This knowledge, however tacit, is a bone-chilling wind blowing through suburbia where the dread of downward mobility is very real.

Admissions processes are often viewed as "black magic" in the words of one parent, or as an erratic, chancy game over which neither parents nor students have much control. Parents who applied and went to college in days with admissions rates of 30-60%, doubt their ability to advise their children through this confusing, competitive maze. They often are aware that aside from purchasing a home, choosing a college could well be the largest capital outlay and the most important investment they undertake. This view is reinforced by the popular press, notably the financial advice periodicals. Those same publications report regularly on the rising costs and increased competition at the "better" schools, thereby fueling economic and emotional insecurity about the best protection for the college-bound

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[3] In fact, two social scientists found that going to a selective college increased one's income 52% over going to an unselective college, while going to a very selective college added 32% above that (Coleman, Rainwater, and McClelland, 1978).

(Business Journal-Portland, 1988; Schurenberg, 1989; Stickney, 1988). Enter private counselors, a new breed of image consultants who help in grooming high school seniors for college.

1.3 Private Counselors

As in many other domains of modern life, the college choice process has become professionalized. As a society, we rely on out-placement specialists when our jobs are in jeopardy, doctors when we are at risk for diseases, and lawyers when we are at the mercy of civil suits and criminal charges. What do parents do when their children are facing the first major choice of their lives at a time when parent-child relationships typically are most strained? Parents, who are aware of how complicated college applications have become and who have the resources to do so, seek the help of outside experts These consultants do the research, advise the parents and students, and relieve some of the pressure. As Mr. Ornstein articulates, parents hand over their trust:

> We simply deferred to her. It's as simple as that. If we hire somebody as the professional, I believe that we've got to listen, if it makes sense.

Because of economic hardship, public high schools have shrunk the numbers of guidance counselors and effectively have divested themselves of the college advisement function. In four of the ten largest U.S. cities, the high school guidance counselor to student average is 1:740 (Fitzsimmons, 1991). In the face of this gap, and where the family has the knowledge and resources to do so, private consultants have taken up the

advisement slack. These counselors-for-hire provide help with completing college applications, coaching for SATs, allaying fears, editing essays, and managing peer pressure. Some of these professionals prefer to be called consultants to distinguish their services from psychological counselors (Stickney, 1988), while others emphasize the emotional component of their work. (Antonoff, 1989)

A major selling point with parents and students is the ability of these counselors to offer individualized attention. Reports vary widely as to whether families seek private counselors' help because of discontent with their school counseling services. What is true is that the needs vary with each family. Some perceive their child's situation as fraught with special needs, while others want a second professional's opinion of options. Still others want extended time just to talk with a counselor (Antonoff, 1989).

These entrepreneurial educational consultants have been labelled "the new growth industry of higher education" by the Wall Street Journal (Gottschalk, 1986) and estimates put the numbers of private consultants at between 200-500 (Krugman and Fuller, 1989; Holub, 1987; Stickney, 1988). They are clustered mostly in large U.S. cities (and some international locations) and in more affluent suburbs. Many of these counselors have themselves come from the ranks of high school counselors or college admissions officers.

Student respondent data comes from a subsample of students of this project. Out of the larger sample of 24 college-bound girls, five students employed the services of a private counselor: three Paloma students--Candy, Judy and Kimberley--and two University High School students--Sara and Rebecca. All of these students or their families knew beforehand of the existence of independent counselors and had only to ask their friends and peers for a referral if they did not already know whom to contact.

All five students came from the two high-SES schools of this study. Both schools had an overwhelmingly college-educated, professionally-employed parent population. Paloma is a private prep school for girls with a counselor to student ratio of 1:56 which is comparable to the U.S. private preparatory school average of 1:65 (Cookson and Persell, 1985). University High School is a public high school with a ratio of one counselor to 365 students. This ratio is better than the California public high school average of 1:848 and comparable to the U.S. average of 1:323. In addition to University High School's counselor, there is a College Information Aide (who has a private college counseling practice) and many parent volunteers.

Candy was the only student who saw a private counselor at her own initiative; otherwise, the path to private counseling for this sample of students was overwhelmingly set upon by the parents. Kimberley and her parents decided to use a private counselor because her parents did not know "what to do" and she

felt that they were disenchanted with Paloma's guidance program. Rebecca's mother "thought it would be a good idea" to get some help because she felt it was time to begin the college choice process and wanted to give Rebecca a push.

Mrs. Taylor initiated college counseling assistance for Judy because she felt her daughter needed SAT coaching and, more importantly, was worried about her daughter's emotional well-being through the anxiety-ridden college choice process. Mrs. Taylor was very clear about the fact that she "didn't want this crazy person" on her hands. Mrs. Taylor felt propelled to private counseling after becoming dissatisfied with the school counselor who collected draft application essays and then returned them to the students after summer vacation with no feedback.

> You're supposed to come up with six or seven different essays for these schools and here was one important one and there was just no help. So that's what I thought a college counselor did for you, was help you. So maybe I kind of panicked a little, but I don't know how to tell her to write a good essay...I don't know what they're looking for.

Mr. Ornstein expressed similar concerns. He felt overwhelmed by the specifics of finding "out in each school how it works" and the need to identify schools where the SATs "will not carry the ball" since his daughter's scores were modest. He and his wife also felt the impact of a less than ideal experience with his oldest daughter's college choice process: "we said this time we would do it a better way."

SAT coaching was a major draw and the presenting problem for most of these young women. Judy Taylor began with her private counselor for SAT coaching, while Candy explicitly bought the services of independent counselor Mabel Cross because of what she felt was a "pitiful" discrepancy between her verbal and math scores on the SAT. She felt "math is something that you can...work at and manipulate it so that you can get a better grade." From Candy's perspective, the private counselor's services were "a package deal" and she could not say "I want to do the SATs and not do the colleges." She also felt that the SAT coaching was "wonderful" and that it helped bring her math score up more than 100 points.

Candy stated that using this one particular counselor was "the trendy thing to do" and that in the classes before her at Paloma, "certain girls...went to her." At Paloma, it seemed taken for granted that a senior would use a private counselor and this one woman in particular. As Kimberley put it, "there's a lady around here who helps you...apply to schools...get organized." This may be an artifact of this counselor having been employed at Paloma. Her services were widely known to many of the students and families.

Candy, however, felt that except for SAT coaching, private counseling was "a mistake." She felt that you should "get from your own school...technical things" like how-to information for filling out applications or information on particular schools. She felt that private counselors often wanted to get too involved

in the student's application preparation. She herself felt she had to keep her counselor at bay, particularly when it came to writing application essays:

> you should write your own essays...we would like fight whenever I'd go in, because I didn't want her to look at my stuff, I didn't want her to get her hands on it.

She also felt that having the counselor too involved would be obvious to admissions officers and would be a liability in their deliberations.

> When the application comes into those schools, if you follow her instructions as she wants you to, the thing would scream private college counseling, which I think would be a very negative thing.

As a contrast, Judy Taylor appreciated Mabel's involvement with the essay process because she "was very helpful to me....I don't like writing essays, and she knows when you have a good essay, and she helps you brainstorm." Aware of the controversy surrounding private counselors, Judy was quick to emphasize that Mabel "never wrote my essay...I wouldn't have let her touch it because it's my process."[4]

Mrs. Taylor provided a detailed explanation of just how involved the private counselor was in Judy's essay development. When Judy was having trouble coming up with an essay topic, she and Mabel discussed what might be appropriate and interesting subjects. They discussed Judy's accomplishments and awards.

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[4] Essay writing generates almost equal amounts of anxiety and work as student rumor mills proclaim this to be the part of the application that affords the best chance to stand out from the masses. Yet, a public Ivy admissions practitioner estimates that essays significantly helped only 2% of the 18,000 applications filed last year at his institution (Winerip, 1987).

Mabel recommended that Judy write an essay which would allow her to speak about an Ivy League institution's book award she had received in her junior year of high school. In search of an essay topic, Judy went to the library and read books on the historical figure closely associated with this award. She produced an imaginative essay in which she met this figure and they discussed their common interests. Judy, her mother, and Mabel all felt pleased with the resulting essay. Judy and her mother were especially grateful for Mabel's suggestion of strategy: first, that Judy find a way to write about the award she had received; and second, that she research the man the award was named after in order to stimulate possible essay topics.

Kimberley, using the same counselor, had a far less satisfactory relationship, but for altogether different reasons. As with school counselors, some students and their independent counselors have personality conflicts. Kimberley felt her private counselor "was a little pushy...our personalities didn't really go together and I left a couple times crying." Moreover, the college application period coincided with the period when Kimberley was home sick with mononucleosis. Mabel had quite a reputation, often one of her selling points, for keeping students on task in the college application process. In this situation, Mabel was afraid Kimberley was going to miss the deadlines and kept "bugging" her. Eventually Kimberley's parents terminated the counseling arrangement.

Kimberley, Judy, and Candy made use of both the school counselor and a private counselor for advice on the college choice process. In spite of supplementing Paloma's extensive advising services with a private counselor, both Candy and Kimberley expressed gratitude toward the school counselor, Mrs. Ball, for her help as well as some guilt about betraying her.

> We have a very good college counselor...it is sort of a slap in the face to Ms. Ball to be going to a private college counselor. (Candy)

In spite of a counselor-student ratio of 1:56, Judy did not try to talk with Mrs. Ball very much about her college choice process because Mrs. Ball "had a lot of people to deal with" and students had to sign up for appointments. Many students and parents mentioned that having an appointment to see their independent counselor meant that they had a specified time where "you go to your Mabel session once a week." In particular, Judy liked "having my appointment just straight for me without having distractions of people walking in." A difference between her school and private counselors that was important to Judy was that her private counselor, in reviewing her potential college choices, "would just tell you seriously whether you had any...chance to get in."

The public high school students and parents who used independent counselors were not at all apologetic about doing so. Sara's father bluntly summed up why his family employed the services of a private counselor to help them through the maze of college-choice decisionmaking and application "packaging."

> We have no confidence in the school to provide that service. It's as simple as that. We felt that we have somewhat of a problem here with Sara because of her SAT and achievement tests results and...we wanted to make sure that she gets to the right schools, and so that was why we decided to be more involved.

In her quest for college counseling to meet her individual needs, Sara spoke to her school counselor, Mr. Dix and Ms. Dean, the College Information Aide, as well as her independent counselor. She saw private counseling as an absolute necessity given her frustration with Mr. Dix's nearly total reliance on the University of California or California State University systems. "I never wanted to go to UC...it really irritated me. She felt that every time she went in the counseling office to ask a question Mr. Dix would begin any response with "'Well for the UC scale.'" With Ms. Dean, Sara knew that the personality match between them was not right for her, and felt that the ratio of counselors to students mitigated against effective counseling. "I just think they need possibly more than one lady dealing with everything." Sara was particularly pleased that she could call her private counselor whenever necessary to ask questions "without feeling guilty" for taking up the counselor's time.

Sara was more than satisfied with the counseling connection she and her private consultant made.

> It's more like she became my friend so she could understand what I was like so that she could think of schools where I would be happy.

Sara felt strongly that students need someone who will boost their spirits and encourage them to apply to a range of schools from safeties to reaches, but especially, that counselors should

not discourage students at the outset. Sara felt that to hear: "'Don't even bother. You're not going to get into any of them'...just lowers you right away. You can't have that."

Rebecca Feinbaum of University High School did not find consulting with a private counselor particularly helpful and spoke with disdain of her counselor. "All she wanted was to give me a...list of schools that she knew I would get in." Although she did not see anything wrong with private counselors, she felt that her private counselor "didn't know me at all...didn't have any confidence in me." After trying what turned out to be an unsatisfactory experience in the private counseling sector, Rebecca went back to Mrs. Dean, the College Information Aide, and was satisfied with updating her on the daily developments in her college-mating game.

Many students and their parents spoke of the major help provided by the private counselors in organizing the college choice process, especially when they helped seniors find a way to conduct their college choice process in a way that fit into an already, very busy senior year schedule. Judy's mother said:

> what she did really was take the pressure off us to organize it...all the information which we don't have without a lot of research...then she set it all out ...with all the deadlines written down, so it became a manageable process that Judy just chipped away, week by week.

Students spoke of receiving accordion files or notebooks with information on SATs, achievement tests, college summaries, financial aid, and other materials. Moreover, the private counselor worked out personal schedules complete with weekly

tasks for each student providing a master plan for assembling the various application materials for each school. Several parents and students mentioned that they appreciated the private counselors spending time and resources to visit college campuses to make or keep the acquaintance of admissions staff so that they were able to offer students a first-hand perspective on individual campus climates, offerings, and admissions insider information.

The other major reason cited by parents and students for using a private counselor was to get help with the emotional burden of the current, high-pressure college choice process. As Candy expressed it, "a lot of girls went...out of fear that this whole college thing was out of their control and they needed help."

Mrs. Taylor, expressing a parental perspective on the pressures of completing a demanding high school workload while managing the college choice process, was concerned with Judy's mental health.

> She wasn't sleeping at night and she was crying a lot, just really being under pressure. I said "Honey, please, it's okay. There's a plan for your life...all we want you to do is go where you can succeed...get in a school where you do well, and that's the whole point. Getting the degree is the whole point, but feeling good about yourself and living through this whole process is even more to the point.

Mr. Ornstein was equally concerned that the application process pressures were dragged out through the whole year as seniors waited for college acceptances. He was particularly concerned with his daughter's physical health and how the stress was:

> taking its toll, there is no question about it. As a matter of fact she may even need some surgery. I'm talking about an extreme situation ...this is not the only reason, but this is definitely one of the major contributors...we reduced it a little bit by taking the advice of the counselor...we thought it was a necessity.

Mr. Ornstein saw hiring a private counselor as a foregone cost of protecting his daughter from heightened competition in today's college admissions environment.

> It's not cheap....We never thought twice about it, because when it comes to education...money is the last consideration.

Independent consultants charge between $30-125 per hour and parents usually spend between $400 and $2500 (Stickney, 1988) for helping their children define their postsecondary opportunities and select the college of their choice. But the costs are not limited to private counselors. Time magazine has estimated that with application fees, private counselors, SATs and coaching, college visits, and private tutors where necessary--all of which were costs incurred by students in this study---the costs of applying to college can run over $3000.

Application fees range from $15-50 and although half of the 1988 U.S. college freshmen reported applying to one or two colleges, 22% reported applying to five or more (Schurenberg, 1989). Among school and private counselors alike, six schools is widely recognized as a manageable, even reasonable number to apply to for a student in the quixotic, highly competitive range

of schools (Stickney, 1988).[5] There are major differences in the application practices of students from different socio-economic statuses: first-generation college-goers tend to apply to few schools and the most competitive Ivies or less expensive state schools, while middle- and upper-income students apply everywhere sometimes up to 22 applications (Winerip, 1984).

The use of SAT coaching services for college application enhancement also has risen: revenues for Stanley Kaplan--one of the largest SAT preparation services--doubled between 1983 and 1988 (Time, 1988). Visits to college campuses--which were conducted by most Paloma, many University, and some Gate of Heaven and Mission Cerrito students from this sample--include costs for transportation and oftentimes lodging. When campuses to be visited were on the East Coast, many parents in this study spent considerable sums of money for these visits.[6]

Clearly not all students, either in this study or in the general population, are engaging in this costly behavior, which, as a counterpoint to college enrollment management, I am labelling admissions management. However, this phenomenon is real and evident to a certain subpopulation of parents,

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[5] For the 24 students in this study, the high-SES students filed many applications: on average the high-SES students filed 10 applications, while the low-SES students filed many fewer applications, 2-3.

[6] None of these calculations factor in the proliferation of summer opportunities which students and parents use to acquire credentials which will enhance college applications. These opportunities have become very popular and include enrollment in summer schools, travel abroad, and outdoor adventure programs (Fitzsimmons, 1991; Time, 1988).

admissions officers and the popular press. Numerous articles appear regularly in national magazines like Time, Newsweek, and Money; local newspapers across the U.S.; professional journals; and college alumni magazines of all sorts including Harvard.

Why is this phenomenon of admissions management occurring, and who are the students and parents who are engaging in it? For all the popular coverage, there is a paucity of scholarly research in this area (Krugman and Fuller, 1989). In a 1987 New York State study commissioned for the National Association for College Admissions Counselors (NACAC), 20% of college-bound seniors used private counselors. This may be higher than for either California or the nation, since in the Northeastern U.S. "college angst" is high (Douglas, 1989). The head of NACAC has anecdotal evidence of some private high schools where half of the senior class are seeing independent counselors, while Mabel Cross admits that most of her clientele are from private schools (Holub, 1987). These are the schools with the best counselor to student ratios, the most sophisticated state of the art advising programs, and the most school resources devoted to college guidance (Cookson and Persell, 1985).

Anecdotally, we know that most students using independent counselors are from upper-middle class homes where families view nonschool-based admissions support services as an absolute necessity in a struggle to guard against losing ground in the status and economic security game. Clearly, these families feel the need for a counselor who will look beyond the high school

transcript and the SAT profile to see and advise the girl they know is capable of more than what the dismissive bottomline numbers suggest. They have the luxury of being able to buy the assistance they need to choose a college.

Whether these parents and students are seizing any otherwise unavailable opportunity by using these counselors is not known, although most admissions staff believe that private counselors' services do not alter the ultimate outcome (Krugman and Fuller, 1989). I would contend that this assessment might be over-simplified. Future research might be able to prove that one way that private counselors reshape college-choice outcomes is in introducing their clients to a wider, or at least a different, range of colleges to consider than that student might consider on her own or that the high school counselor might suggest.

Many practitioners believe that students using consultant services are academically weak, economically advantaged students whose families are concerned with the inadequacies of high schools' abilities to provide good college counseling. Rebecca Feinbaum offers the student's perspective on leveraging the accumulated advantages of an upper-middle-class background to maximize college choices

> I've done all the things that you're supposed to do if you want to get the best advantage that you possibly can get. I'm really a prime case of trying to get into the very best, most prestigious school that I possibly can get into, without maybe having the kind of marks that you should have.

What is true is that this new profession of consultant is an unregulated, unsupervised one. Although many counselors see

themselves as helping students learn how to make good decisions (Antonoff, 1989), high school guidance counselors and admissions officers worry about ethics and overinvolvement of counselors in processes that students should be doing for themselves (Krugman and Fuller, 1989).

1.4 Conclusions

In this paper I have described the dialectical dynamics of enrollment shifts, increased competition, and the advent and boom of nonschool-based admissions support services as individual, class, and organizational responses to environmental change. Many of the practices of the high-SES, college-going students in this study and in the U.S. today already have been institutionalized. The culture of upper-middle-class American life has incorporated a notion of college choice that appears to follow regular patterns and rules. College choice has become a highly rationalized, managed process which requires professional assistance. Students' actions can be interpreted simultaneously as an enactment of predetermined scripts and as internally directed, autonomous choice complete with motivation and purpose (Meyer et al., 1987).

College admissions environments shape the organizational structure and culture of high schools as they relate to college guidance. The low-SES students and schools of this study (and probably most low-SES students and schools) do not participate in the college choice behaviors outlined in this paper and instead are influenced more by local opportunity structures and by their

limited financial resources. Both of the high-SES schools of this study are, however, shaped by a national, volatile, competitive college admissions environment which is further influenced by a local, community culture focused on prestige. Mr. Avalon, father of one University High School student who did not use a private counselor, described today's pressure-cooker mentality of college-applicant high school seniors.

> It's much more in the top drawer of concerns of children of this generation... Frankly, I can vaguely even remember anything about deciding myself....My decision was pretty much based on proximity, I went to the nearest school. I didn't really think of anything else.

This paper offered parents' and students' perspectives on the impact of the changing admissions environment. The institutional analysis begun here is a new model for viewing and analyzing enrollment trends and individual student action as inextricably intertwined. It hopefully offers insight into ways that future researchers can make clearer the influences affecting enrollments and student behaviors, thus helping to better predict enrollments and student advising needs.

To conclude this paper on a personal level that symbolizes the frustration of many students, I offer the case and comments of Susan Harriman of Paloma school who did not use the services of a private counselor, but nonetheless experienced the stress of the competitive admissions process. Susan got feisty with the last application of her 14 admissions applications when the essay asked her to be creative. At this point, exhausted and tired of completing applications, Susan spelled out in a ransom-note style

"Students for more random college admissions demand...." Susan then listed her demands, an example of which was that every fourth application should be discarded.

> Then at the bottom...I signed it like a big X. And I got waitlisted, so I really don't know whether it went over well or...

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